

Effective Discipleship: Building Up The Body Of Christ

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Introduction:

Foundational to the purpose and mission of every Christian church is the instruction of Jesus Christ to his earliest disciples in what has come to be known as "The Great Commission." Expressed variously in each of the gospels, these instructions form the basis on which we must determine the ultimate effectiveness of every ministry in the church. In Mark's gospel, the instruction is to "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation." In Luke, the Christ must suffer and rise from the dead and "repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all the nations." But in Matthew's gospel, the instructions become even more precise: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations," (scripture's original *panta ta ethne* here conveys universal imagery; the idea of all nations or peoples), "baptizing them," and "teaching them to observe all I have commanded you."

A disciple, literally a "learner," is one who becomes a believer, follower, imitator and adherent of a teacher. Arius and Johnson, in *The Great Commission: Biblical Models for Evangelism*, suggest that the vision of mission as "making disciples" is no less than the evangelization of each generation, learning together the way of God's reign, in a community of disciples, at each stage in life and throughout all of the experiences of life, and in each particular context. "Disciples are not born, they are made, and it takes a whole lifetime, with no graduation in sight!"

God's reign and righteousness, fulfilled in Jesus Christ, are key to the mandate, "teaching them to observe all I have commanded you." This is more than merely believing in the teachings of a church, shopping for an uplifting worship experience or embracing a spirituality because it feels good. In Matthew, Jesus' teaching is a call for a concrete decision by listeners to believe, follow him and submit to God's reign. It is the gospel of Christian salvation. The entire ministry and message of Jesus in Luke presents dimensions of compassion and justice that disciples are called to emulate. Here, we clearly see a gospel of Christian social action. In the story of Pentecost and subsequent ministry of the apostles, discipleship is focal in the gathering, sharing and fellowship of Jesus' followers. In Acts 14:21-22, "after they had preached the gospel...and made many disciples, they returned...strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith." This is the gospel of Christian community.

Application:

In the first place, clarity of purpose, beliefs and values, vision and mission is critical to your church's approach to discipleship. Metropolitan Community Churches are made up of people with diverse religious backgrounds. These faith traditions interpret the teachings of Jesus differently from each other. In some Christian churches, emphasis is placed upon salvation as a personal spiritual experience leading to a new way of life. In others, salvation is seen almost exclusively as a personal and collective commitment to social justice leading to a better world. Both views find rich support in the teachings of Jesus. It is important to emphasize both dimensions of the gospel; the evangelistic mandate of personal transformation and the cultural mandate of justice. Build the balance of all of Christ's teaching into your statements of values, vision and mission.

Discipleship begins with evangelism. For many people receptive to the message and ministry of Metropolitan Community Church, the words "evangelism" or "evangelical" may evoke painful or negative associations with images and institutions that resulted in

legalistic, judgmental, or even toxic religious experiences. For some, "evangelism" may suggest intrusive or offensive methods of trying to win religious converts. But "evangelism" finds its roots in a very good biblical word, euangelizomai, which means "to announce good news." Even if some in MCC and in the communities we serve have had bad experiences with churches calling themselves "evangelical" but offering no good news, "evangelism" is a word, a concept and an opportunity we need to redefine in light of the good news we have experienced.

The most effective approach to evangelism begins with the awareness that more than eighty percent of newcomers are attracted to a church because they were influenced by existing relationships. This has been called friendship evangelism or network evangelism. Peter Wagner, in *Strategies for Church Growth*, speaks of presence evangelism. It is sharing the good news through acts of compassion and works of justice. To that, he adds two other types of evangelism; proclamation and persuasion. Nothing is more persuasive than the positive expression of a personal experience to a receptive person. This is evangelism at its best.

Once attracted to your church, several vital experiences will influence the newcomer's path to discovery and discipleship. The first of these is the sense of inspiration, welcome and relevance to his or her needs. The second is early discovery of ways to gain information and form new friendships through events or small group activities. The third is awareness of one's own gifts and finding possibilities for personal involvement in your church. The fourth is encounter of opportunity for spiritual formation and growth.

Guiding Principles:

1. The Body of Christ is the essential model for the structure and ministry of the church. Spiritual gifts define the diverse members and ministries, and discipleship always leads to inclusion and service in the Body of Christ. Discipleship always happens in community.
2. To be effective, the presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ and invitation to discipleship must occur in ways that are relevant to and considerate of the hearer's needs, life-situation, culture and context.
3. The gospel of Jesus Christ embraces both an evangelistic mandate calling individuals to personal spiritual transformation, and a cultural mandate calling individuals and the Body of Christ to acts of compassion and works of justice.
4. Christian discipleship includes proclamation and belief, call and response, and learning and action in a lifelong learning process leading to continuous growth and service.

▼ **Next: Diagnostic Questions for Self-Assessment**

▼ **Return to Discipleship Index Page**



Benchmarks For Effective Discipleship: Diagnostic Questions for Self-Assessment: July 15, 1998

Evangelism/Outreach:

Does your church present an image of positive spirituality to your community?

In what ways do you promote positive spirituality? Do visitors and members sense a positive spirit in your services and meetings? Are services and sermons designed to specifically communicate hope, affirmation and practical application? Are there potential barriers of perception in the minds of prospective newcomers that would make it difficult for them to find and embrace your church? In what ways can you anticipate and address these barriers early in the attraction process? Does your church participate visibly in the community? Do you cooperate with other community organizations on causes, projects or events? Do your pastor and other church leaders represent your congregation to other community and religious groups? Are your ministries, programs and services designed to meet basic human needs? Is your church effectively dealing with internal conflict? Are conflicts processed in healthy ways? Is your congregation perceived as "healthy?"

Does your church have an "outward" orientation with intentional strategies for outreach, marketing and evangelism?

List your church's programs and ministries. What benefits can you identify with each? How can you promote these benefits to your target audiences? Are your prospective newcomers from unchurched or non-Christian backgrounds? What are their needs and expectations? How does this affect the message you share? What are the areas in which newcomers experience objections or anxieties in your church? In what ways can you provide answers to these "up front?" Are you maintaining an adequate mailing list? Are you aggressively building this list through community promotions? What is your church's policy for removing names from the list? In what ways can you more effectively use your mailing list to reach people? Have you considered using e-mail as a variant of a direct mail ministry? Do you maintain a contact list of the local mainline press, gay press and religion editors? Do you send new releases and public service announcements to announce the events and activities of your church?

Does your church place high priority on the ability and willingness of church members to share positive church experiences with their friends and acquaintances?

Do you consistently encourage your congregation to invite their friends to worship? Can everyone in your congregation clearly state the mission of your church? Do you provide training opportunities to accomplish "friendship evangelism" in a positive, healthy, non-threatening manner? Do you provide your congregation with culturally appropriate resources for evangelism? Do you recognize members who effectively reach their friends and acquaintances? What are the barriers that keep your members from inviting their friends?

Inspiration/Information/Invitation:

What is the experience of newcomers in your church? You get one chance to make a first impression!

How do newcomers experience your church? What are the points of entry to your church? The worship service, small groups, special events? Increasingly the trend is toward multiple points of entry, seven days a week. However, for most MCCs (especially smaller churches) Sunday worship will continue to be the primary point of entry for newcomers. *What is the experience of newcomers visiting your worship services?* User-friendly access and ample parking? A "welcome center" with helpful information? Printed information that is attractive and easy to understand? An uplifting, joyous, inspiring and celebrative event? A warm, caring and welcoming congregation? Someone to intentionally welcome them *following* the worship service? A comfortable, clean and inviting facility? All of these make

powerful first impressions.

Are newcomers considered visitors or guests, are they met by greeters or hosts, do they encounter gatekeepers or sponsors in your church?

Visitors reside temporarily, a short stay for a particular purpose; guests are persons welcomed and extended hospitality. Greeters give a formal welcome in a specific manner; hosts take particular concern that guests are well accommodated. Sponsors are those people who help facilitate the entrance of newcomers into the church; gatekeepers are those who screen newcomers out. Every church requires interpretation for newcomers. Hosts and sponsors do two things: They provide helpful information, and they link guests with key people (such as church leaders and people with whom the newcomer is likely to have something in common.) Does your church have an intentional, organized approach for trained volunteers to welcome newcomers?

How can newcomers discover new relationships in your church?

Do you regularly plan and schedule events designed to help newcomers connect with other people? Eating out together after the worship service? Opportunities to meet the pastor and other leaders? A newcomers class with information about the church and opportunity to meet new people? An invitation to meet in a small group? New face to face groups that will meet several times? Intentional plans to conduct such types of activities increase the possibility that newcomers will discover new friendships in your church!

What are the follow-up actions taken by your church to communicate with newcomers?

Does your church register attendance? Does your church identify newcomers? How? (Note: many will not want to raise their hand or be otherwise conspicuously identified publically.) Do you tell guests what will be done with the information they give? (Often, unchurched people fear they will receive an unannounced visit.) Do you communicate (by phone or letter) with first-time guests within 48 hours of their visit? Do you have an orientation program for newcomers other than your membership classes? What follow-up occurs with second-time guests? Does your church use attendance registration data to track attendance patterns of individuals? Is that information used for follow-up purposes? How often does your church offer membership classes?

Instruction/Spiritual Formation/Growth:

Does your church have an intentional, well-organized system for the orientation of newcomers?

Do you offer inquirers classes or newcomers orientation classes scheduled frequently? Do you offer a frequently scheduled discovery/membership class series? Usually, approximately fifty percent of the individuals in a worship service will not be members of your church. Do you frequently communicate the availability and schedule of the orientation or membership/discovery opportunities? Do you offer regularly scheduled events on topics of interest to prospective newcomers; such as classes or seminars on the "Bible and Homosexuality"?

Do you provide opportunities for instruction and encouragement in progressive levels of spiritual growth?

Do you assess the differing levels of spiritual knowledge and maturity at which people enter your church? What opportunities does your church offer for spiritual formation and development of the spiritual disciplines of prayer, study, reflection and meditation? Do you offer a shepherding or mentoring program providing one-on-one information, instruction and encouragement? Do you offer Bible study opportunities at beginning, intermediate and advanced levels? Do you offer instruction in prayer and prayer meetings?

Do the leaders of your church embrace the importance, cast a vision and support the actions of making new disciples in your congregation?

Is the priority of "making disciples" visible in the worship and social life of your church? Do you provide basic training on the steps and processes of discipleship? Do you provide the permission, encouragement and resources for the people of your church to spend time building relationships? Do you offer recognition of those people in your church who are building redemptive relationships and pioneering dynamic groups?

Community/Groups/Relationships:

Does your church conduct a periodic assessment of its sub-groups?

Do the leaders of your church have an understanding of the dynamics of group size and church size? List all of the sub-groups in your church that meet face-to-face through recurring activities, meetings or ministries. How many of these groups usually involve 16 or fewer individuals (cell-group size)? Note: the ideal size of a cell-group is ten or less individuals. How many usually involve 17-60 individuals (typical fellowship-group size)? Is there a clear written statement of purpose/mission for each sub-group?

Are the sub-groups which meet regularly in your church intentionally designed to build community?

Does the purpose and activity of each group include elements that will foster building of relationships and spiritual growth in the participants? Do each of these groups assure participants' awareness of the values, vision and mission of your church? Do these groups have intentional means of welcoming and integrating newcomers?

Is your church organized on the basis of cell-groups or do you offer a program of cell-groups?

Most churches today have some form of cell-groups, and there are numerous names and variations of approaches to cell-groups. Typically, cell-groups are intentional small groups, usually with twelve or less people, and specifically focused on nurture and/or mission. For some churches, cell-groups are the primary ministry structure and basic building block of the church. For others, cell-groups are one ministry among others in the church. The key question is, *does your church have an intentional approach to cell-groups?* Is there a well-defined and organized system for the development of leadership and management of the cell-groups? Does a growing percentage of your congregation participate in cell-groups? Are there frequent opportunities for newcomers to be incorporated into cell-groups?

Spiritual Gifts/Service:

Does your church teach and model "the priesthood of all believers" and that all members of the church are called to ministry?

Do you have an ongoing comprehensive program of teaching on spiritual gifts? Is the concept of spiritual gifts and the relationship of those gifts to all of the ministries in your church included in newcomers' orientation or membership classes? Does the Pastor periodically present sermons or teaching on spiritual gifts? Does your church offer advanced training on spiritual gifts and mentoring skills for ministry advisors? In your church, is the discovery and development of spiritual gifts a dynamic and evolutionary process, recognizing that new gifts and preferred ministry roles may change for individuals?

Does your church have well-defined roles and tasks that relate to specific gifts and ministries?

List all the tasks or roles presently filled in the various activities or ministries of your congregation. Do you have brief written descriptions for the tasks or duties of each role? **Note:** For every ten adults attending worship you should have six well-defined roles or jobs. Are the written descriptions defined with a simple and clear relationship to spiritual gifts?

Does your church have an organized process for guidance, placement and evaluation of individuals in various ministries?

Does your church have a database and tracking system to manage the information and process of placement, participation and evaluation of individuals in ministry positions? Does your church conduct a "Spiritual Gifts Inventory" which includes orientation to the concept of spiritual gifts? Are congregants asked to complete a questionnaire that identifies individual interests, skills, experience and education? Is a ministry advisor trained and in place to present options and guide individuals into ministry tasks/roles? Do you have a system in place for review and evaluation of participation and, if indicated, guidance and development for new areas of ministry?

Trends That Effect Your Ministry
Return to Discipleship Index Page

